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MAXIMS OF A QUEEN

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CHRISTINA OF SWEDEN (1626-89)

Selected & Translated
BY UNA BIRCH

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INTRODUCTION

HESE maxims were published many years after the Queen of Sweden's death, and when they appeared men said that they rivalled the sayings of La Rochefoucauld. Though a comparison sometimes serves to point a likeness, in this case it but emphasised a difference, for the cynical wit and contempt for men displayed in the sayings of the French courtier have no parallel in the sober wisdom of the thoughts garnered by the Swedish Queen.

In the occasional leisure snatched between Council and Court, or instruction and reading, Christina jotted down in aphoristic form the

outcome of her daily experience, and thus desultorily composed a great number of maxims. Though the physician, Bourdelot, and a few others amongst her friends possessed either more or less complete collections of these sayings, it is improbable that they were ever intended for publication, or made except to beguile those moments of idleness which occur even in the fullest lives. A manuscript copy of the work was found in the Queen's large and straggling handwriting in the Riario Palace in Rome after her death, with the date 1680 inscribed upon it. Since those of her personal letters and records to which we have access survive to us through an accident—the death, midway in his task, of the sole executor charged with the destruction of her papers—it is probable that the maxims

would have been burnt along with the rest had Azzolino's life been spared, which would have been lamentable, for though some of the actual sentences exist in the copies already alluded to, it can never be without interest to have authentic editions of the reflections of great persons on the world about them, if these reflections bear the stamp of an intimate experience.

While on the throne of Sweden Christina, because of her erudition, was called Pallas Nordica, and if we heeded all the flattery as well as the genuine praise of which she was the recipient we should be amazed that she remained modest or simple about herself. The learning so much belauded by contemporaries was certainly an achievement. She could speak and read with facility in Greek and Latin, and expressed

herself in five modern tongues with fluency. She studied Hebrew as well as philosophy, political science, and mathematics; but, in spite of these labours, she found time to be a good shot and a fine horsewoman, and to join in all the winter sports of the North. Descartes, who gave her lessons in philosophy, said she was made more in the image of God than most men. Cromwell admired her conduct of affairs; Milton and Marvell wrote, the one in prose and the other in verse, to celebrate her greatness, knowledge and power. Scholars from all Western lands, and envoys from such far places as Ethiopia and Tartary, came to pay homage to the Queen over whom imagination and panegyric had cast such a wonderful glamour. For nearly fifty years of the seventeenth century she was a cynosure for the

eyes of the European world, interesting men no less as a private person than as a ruler. Having ascended the throne at the age of six, she twenty-three years later resigned its responsibility, and on joining the Catholic Church chose Rome as her abode. Except during the four long journeys which she undertook in order to straighten her financial affairs and transact political business, she lived in that city for the remaining thirty-five years of her life.

It has been supposed that Christina abandoned her kingdom in order to enter the Catholic Church, but it appears that, though her hatred for Lutheranism had begun as a child, she had contemplated abdication and desired retirement at least two years before she decided to adopt another faith. To an individualist the great object in life

is self-development, and for this woman abdication and conversion were but acts of ascension into true unfettered life. She cannot be said to have abdicated in order to become a Roman Catholic, any more than she can be said to have become a Roman Catholic in order to abdicate. The two acts were the outcome of the same ambition, and though one was not the result of the other, they may be said to be complementary. All the gilded chains with which a people binds its King, and all the rigours of Protestant worship were to her offensive and odious and left her with the one wish to escape into an enlarged and more liberal life. In executing the considerable duties of her station, which she felt that any man could undertake as well or better than herself, she had little

or no time for that self-cultivation and acquirement of new learning which was to her the end of life. Formalities of any kind were irksome to her, for she was characterised by a passion for essentials and by a love of simplicity in all things. Utterly without personal vanity and without fear she could not be dissuaded from her decision to embrace private life by the thought of loss of prestige or dread of poverty. Conversing one day with Sir Bulstrode Whitelocke, Ambassador from the English Commonwealth, on the matter of abdication, she said, in reply to his observation that Cromwell had once contemplated retirement but that immediately an additional honour had been forced upon him, 'All that I desire is to be less than I am by a private retirement.'

Like Elizabeth of England, she

had no inclination for marriage, indeed, her spirit was too free and independent to submit to what in her case would assuredly have proved an unequal and constraining yoke. Though petitioned again and again by senate and people to form some political alliance that might benefit her country and ensure the succession, she consistently refused to do so. A medal, designed by her, advertised to the world the detachment of her attitude to life. It bore the emblem of the Manucodiata, or Bird of Paradise, of which it is said that since it has no feet it must ever hang hovering in the air. The inscription, '*Libero i nacqui e vissi e morro sciolto*,' which surrounded the symbolic bird, announced Christina's determination of celibacy.

Established at Rome she founded an academy of letters, which held its

meetings in her palace, and Ranke is of opinion that her austere classic taste tended to curb the extravagance and hyperbole which rendered ridiculous the polite literature of that day. Some of her great leisure was occupied with the study of astronomy, and instructed by Cassini of Bologna she watched the glittering procession of the stars through the dark hours of many nights, and speculated on their courses and their secrets. Alchemy fascinated her, as it has fascinated many seeking souls, and numerous were the hermetic experiments which, together with Cardinal Azzolino, she conducted in her laboratory. The Queen's collection of books and manuscripts, which contained inestimable treasures from the celebrated Petau library, as well as the rarest works from the stores of such bibliophiles as Vossius,

Mazarin, and Grotius, had been collected at enormous cost, and was said to be the best in Europe. Bronzes and pictures she avidly secured whenever death or financial embarrassment necessitated their disposal, and the Riario Palace in Rome became not only the pride and delight of its owner but the envy of all connoisseurs.

As curtain after curtain rings up in the long drama of Christina's life, we see with extraordinary clearness and detail the scenes in which she played. Her personality always fills the stage, and whether it be as little child giving audience to ambassadors from Muscovy, as grown woman at her abdication bidding farewell to her people, as convert by the cenotaph of the great Maximilian, as pilgrim kneeling in the dust before the venerated shrine of Loretto, as

amazon prancing into Rome on a caparisoned white horse, as Justice condemning Monaldeschi, or as Pallas Nordica presiding over the Italian academy, every part she played is instinct with dramatic interest and vivid with life.

Few educated people live with spontaneity, for learning and the many conventions of civilised society usually crush originality and make man more subservient to circumstance than to the dictates of his own soul and conscience. Christina, unafraid of sharp individualisation, lived fearlessly from the well-spring of her own nature, heeding but little the opinion of others and seeking to realise in all things 'the intention of her Maker.' Because she had '*la grande curiosité*' she never grew old, but retained her eager interest in politics, religion, letters, and science,

and her passion for new acquirement, till she was summoned to enter the life in which men hope that curiosity is satisfied. The simplicity and fortitude which characterised her every action did not desert her in dying. She left directions that all her papers should be burnt, that her funeral should be quiet, and that her plain tomb should bear no other inscription than '*Vixit Christina annos sexaginta tres.*' Those who have seen the marble monument dedicated to her memory in S. Peter's will know that this, her last request, was not complied with.

There was in her nature something of the ascetic and the saint. She could endure hardness with joy, and she could face suffering and adversity with equanimity. Turning instinctively from the mediation of confessors and directors, she sought in

her prayers and meditations to enter 'that quiet and immense solitude in which the soul is alone with God.' In the confession with which her autobiography is prefaced she says: 'Thou, God, hast given me a heart which nothing will content: with alarming ingratitude it counts as nothing the graces Thou hast showered on me.... Nothing can satisfy me but Thee. Thou hast made me so great that if Thou gavest me the Empire of the whole world it would not satisfy me.... I ask Thee, for Thyself, by Thyself. I pray Thee not to refuse the ardent insatiable desire that Thou hast wakened in my heart, and that I recognise as the greatest of Thy graces. Render me worthy to possess Thee by a blind and perfect resignation such as is due to Thee.... Break my secret bonds, however

noble or innocent they be. Help me to abandon this my work to Thee and Thee only, as well as my life and my death for time and for eternity.'

But a fragment of the autobiography remains to us, and though it seems probable from a letter written by the Queen to Azzolino from Hamburg that a great deal more was set down than now exists, we cannot know whether it was ever finished, and can only regret that so little is left to us of a confession that was intended as a sincere record of empirical life. The maxims show something of the manner of woman that Christina was, and if only as the work of a magnanimous soul they deserve not to be altogether forgotten.

UNA BIRCH.

THE WORK OF THE LEISURE OF CHRISTINA, QUEEN OF SWEDEN, 1680

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E should forget the past, endure or enjoy the present, and resign ourselves to the future.

To expect the recognition of benefits is almost to merit ingratitude.

Benefits should be scattered at random like corn in a field.

To be under an obligation to those one loves is an agreeable servitude.

We should enjoy everything without scruple and surrender everything without pain.

We do not always love what we esteem, but we always esteem what we love.

The merit of the doer gives the value to the action.

Over sympathies and antipathies the reason has no power.

We should revenge ourselves in benefits: all other vengeance, no matter how just, is unworthy of an heroic soul.

Fools are more to be feared than villains.

The secret of making oneself ridiculous is to plume oneself on the talents which one does not possess; we may deceive everyone but ourselves.

Conscience is the only mirror which neither flatters nor deceives.

Just as a pilot marks the rocks on which he has made shipwreck, so ought we to mark our faults in order to avoid them.

Modesty is a kind of sincerity.

We love those to whom we have done good and hate those to whom we have done evil.

We should be more miserly with our time than with our money.

Man is not made for pleasure but pleasure for man.

Custom makes us insensible to almost everything.

The body must be subdued and treated as a slave, but as a slave deserving of charity.

We should never speak of ourselves either in praise or blame.

To praise anyone either more or less than he deserves is to betray truth.

It is more difficult to do evil than to do good.

We must always try to do our best; but if we stumble, even if we fall, we must never think that all is

lost, but with God's help pick ourselves up again as quickly as possible.

Nature seldom makes a hero and Fortune does not always proclaim those that she makes.

It is the star not the merit that gives the reputation.

To lose occasions of distinguishing oneself is a great loss.

Men always eye with disapprobation the things they are unable to do.

The passions are the salt of life; we are neither happy nor unhappy except in their exercise.

Counsel is not command.

Extraordinary merit is a crime which is never pardoned.

To suffer for well doing is in itself a kind of recompense.

We should read for instruction, correction, consolation.

Reading is part of the duty of an honest man.

Books flatter neither the passions nor the faults of those who use them.

We should make use of men of letters as if they were living libraries, and as such we may esteem them and take counsel of them, never forgetting, however, that they are but poor advisers in affairs of the great world.

Knowledge of the past is of great help for the future.

Those who do not please seldom deceive.

We should rather fear those we love than those we hate.

We are always sufficiently clever if we are sufficiently strong, for mere cleverness seldom makes up for want of strength.

A man of great ability can neither please a fool nor love him.

We should never believe anything we have not dared to doubt.

Weakness is the greatest of misfortunes and the greatest of defects.

The familiarity which breeds contempt in us for some people breeds in us respect for others.

We must pardon everything to men of great spirit and great heart, for to have great spirit and great heart is to have merit.

To make secrets of trifles is to make oneself ridiculous.

A prince must think of himself as a slave crowned by the people.

If princes knew their duties no one would wish to be one.

No one thinks himself insulted by the kick of a horse or an ass; we ought to have a like contempt for those who despise us, no matter how they show it.

It is well to remember that vain people can never be trusted.

We should make no comparisons for fear of doing an injustice to others or to ourselves.

Men only shed their ambition with their skin.

The past should count as nothing, we should always live at new costs.

The man is worth nothing who does not prefer duty to pleasure.

To be envious or jealous of a person is to acknowledge his merit.

Hope is a passion that evokes the falsest pleasures and the truest pains.

We should be inconsolable in dying if we did not age.

We ought to be heroically indifferent to all that happens—but the indifference must be heroic, not stupid.

Happiness does not lie in the opinion of others.

In the world we must get accustomed to seeing the foolish thought clever, the cowards brave, the wicked good. We are but novices in living if we grow angry over this.

The sea is the symbol of great souls. However agitated may be its surface its depths are always calm.

Nothing which has a term is insupportable.

We are almost always children, but we change our games and our toys.

The dead have a sad advantage over the living, for they are the first to forget.

One should live with men as with sick people from whom one endures everything.

Secrets are rarer than one supposes, all men have confidants, and these confidants have others.

The man was truly wise who wished neither to obey nor to command.

To obey no one is a greater happiness than to command the whole world.

Great friendship is as rare as great love.

Life is too short for love.

We must pardon our enemies, our friends, ourselves; but it is more difficult to pardon ourselves than others.

We ought to forget offences, never benefits.

Health and money exist to be spent.

We are not made innocent in order that we may remain ignorant.

To believe everything is weakness, to believe nothing folly.

Perhaps those are right who call youth a fever, but I wish the fever would last all my life, even if it made me dream.

All the life we live between childhood and decrepitude is youth if we are strong. There is no other youth than perfect health and vigour of soul and body. Everyone who has such health is young, no matter if he be a hundred years old, and everyone who has it not is old if his years number but eighteen.

Pleasures fatigue more than business.

Those who do not love reading deprive themselves of the most useful of pleasures.

We should cultivate our souls rather than torment our bodies.

Conscience gives no quarter.

It requires more courage to marry than to go to war.

There is no estate in which good and evil do not balance each other.

To conquer oneself is to triumph over one's most powerful enemy.

There are things which we should neither do nor say; there are others we should do and not say; others again we should say and not do; yet others that we should do and say without hesitation.

We are always apprentices in the craft of living.

We ought never to be satisfied with ourselves, however satisfied others may seem with us.

We should always try to surpass ourselves. This occupation will last our lives out.

Enemies are always sincere in their hate, though friends are not in their love.

The secret of making the most annoying things acceptable to oneself is to see in them God and His will.

The greatest profit we get from study is learning not to be insupportable to ourselves.

Patience is the virtue of those who lack either courage or force.

Patience usurps all the merit of necessity.

There is no condition which may not be glorified by our actions or our sufferings.

Men conceal their diseases as if they were crimes.

If we were not ignorant we should neither grow old nor sick. Both ills have their remedies of which we are ignorant.

Despair is pride—a secret and criminal presumption. We are never more free than when we depend on God.

Self-interest is the unknown god to whom many people sacrifice everything.

If God exists not, virtue and honour are but chimeras.

Learning to despise oneself is the only gain of sinning.

By whatever gate we enter Eternity, it is a gate of triumph.

If we took as much trouble to be good as we do to appear good we should end by being so.

Some people are foolish enough to become slaves and martyrs to their clothes and to fashion, and are unhappy if they do not spend their days between the mirror and the comb.

Hypocrisy is the Proteus that assumes a thousand forms, the chameleon which adopts a thousand hues.

We should be the first to forget that we have ever done any good.

God orders men to love Him

more than *themselves*, which proves that self-love is not criminal as some have said.

Resignation is the result of love.

Perfect resignation is the result of perfect love, it is an exquisite and sublime form of adoration.

There are moments in which God communicates Himself to the soul in so ineffable and incomprehensible a manner as to make one forget the whole world.

The most beautiful of all orisons is that of silence and love. God alone understands such language. The majority of men have no experience of such prayer.

True sanctification consists in that

intercourse which passes without witnesses between God and the soul. This glorious and secret communion would amaze even the angels if they could enter the sanctuary.

One never forgets what one loves.

Death is the consoler of all misery and all misfortune.

Charity does not constrain us to praise follies, but it may constrain us to conceal them.

Those who only wish to be known of God have no need of directors. The name of 'director' must be insupportable to any person of spirit.

All scruples cease when in good

faith one surrenders oneself to God.

Old age is more terrible than death, but it consoles men for dying.

Happy are those who die without growing old.

Men talk more than beasts, but it is questionable whether they are more wise.

The only duty of a preacher is to kindle the love of God in man.

True religion consists in loving God and our neighbour. All the rest is mummery.

We may easily be heroes or saints

in the opinion of others, but we must be saints after God's fashion.

The most pardonable of all idolatries is that of the sun.

The famous counsel 'Know thyself,' which men have said is the source of human wisdom, is but the source of misery, for this decree imposes on man the harsh necessity of tearing down his self-disguises and of realising his own nothingness.

However agreeable and glorious life may be, we should be very unhappy if it did not end.

Life would be little and death nothing if the soul were not immortal.

The world should be looked upon

as an inn, in which we abide but a few hours.

Every man who fears death is incapable of great action.

To survive oneself is a misfortune, for which we must console ourselves as we do for other ills.

Philosophy neither changes nor corrects a man.

If the heart is not royal, there is no royalty.

There are people to whom everything and for whom everything is right.

Change is the remedy for many of the ills of life.

The patience of Epictetus and the brutality of his master are equally insupportable.

We ought both to be sensible of and to despise everything that happens.

The world is a great and magnificent temple, of which the earth we tread is the altar whereon day and night continually Time and Death immolate victims to the Author of Nature.

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